

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Statement of Honorable Vernon B. Parker
Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
United States Department of Agriculture

before the

Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement supporting the President's FY 2006 budget proposal for the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights provides policy guidance, leadership and outreach, coordination, training, and complaint prevention and processing for USDA. Our mission is to provide equal opportunity, equal access and fair treatment for all USDA customers and employees.

The FY 2006 Appropriation request for the Office of Civil Rights is \$20.1 million. This is an increase of \$379 thousand over FY 2005. The Office of Civil Rights has made significant progress in addressing major civil rights challenges at USDA. The Office of Civil Rights started FY 2003 with 2,001 pending EEO complaints and resolved 1,016 of these cases. During FY 2004, the Office of Civil Rights received an additional 679 EEO complaints, of which 199 were resolved. The Office started the year with 481 pending program complaints, and resolved 341. During FY 2004, an additional 1,755 program complaints were received, of which 1,487 were resolved. The funding request to carry out the 2006 objectives will help ensure continued improvement.

FY 2006 Objectives

The Office of Civil Rights has the following four overarching strategic objectives for FY 2006 that contribute to the Department's success. They are to:

- 1.) Ensure equal opportunities for employees and applicants and equal access for USDA customers.
- 2.) Ensure that equal employment opportunity and civil rights complaints are processed timely, efficiently, and in a cost effective manner.
- 3.) Increase USDA-wide awareness and use of Alternative Disputes Resolution (ADR) early in resolution of civil rights complaints and non-civil rights disputes.
- 4.) Establish effective outreach programs in USDA.

Key Outcomes for FY 2006

The Office of Civil Rights plans to achieve the following key outcomes in FY 2006:

- 1.) A reduced number of equal employment opportunity and civil rights program complaints. Increasing the education and awareness of civil rights is likely to decrease the number of EEO and civil rights program complaints filed.
- 2.) Efficient and cost effective processing of equal employment opportunity and civil rights program complaints within the regulatory timeframes.

- 3.) Timely and effective resolution of a larger number of civil rights and non-civil rights complaints through increased awareness and use of Alternative Dispute Resolution.
- 4.) Effective outreach programs in every agency. Strengthening the agencies' outreach efforts, developing outreach policies, and providing training on best outreach practices to ensure timely access to all customers, thereby improving minority and underserved population participation in USDA programs.

I would like to emphasize the importance of the Committee's approval of the President's \$20.1 million budget for USDA's Office of Civil Rights. The budget includes an increase of \$379 thousand to fund pay costs.

The proposed FY 2006 budget will help ensure that USDA continues progress in providing fair and equitable delivery of its services and programs to our customers and also protects the civil rights of USDA employees.